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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 000201

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/13/2016

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SUBJECT: MOFAZ DISCUSSES PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS, NORTHERN BORDER, CROSSINGS, AND IRAN WITH WELCH AND ABRAMS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz told the Ambassador, A/S Welch, DAPNSA Abrams, General Dayton, and PolCouns January 12 that the GOI would not talk to Hamas members elected to the PLC if they did not give up their terrorist activities. He said that the elections should take place as scheduled on January 25, and suggested that the USG ask PA President Mahmud Abbas for a plan on how the PA is going to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure after the elections. Mofaz remarked that this is part of the PA's commitments under the road map and the February 2005 Sharm al-Sheikh summit, and assessed that Abbas has not made any progress on this front over the past year. With respect to Israel's northern border, Mofaz claimed that he had personally seen Hezbollah's preparations to escalate terror attacks against Israel, and suggested that the Lebanese army should be on the Blue Line to help prevent such attacks. He also asked the USG for advance warning if the USG plans to put aggressive pressure on Syria because Israel would be Syria's first target. Mofaz said that despite the fact that there is weapons smuggling taking place at the Rafah crossing, and that Karni was almost attacked by a car bomb four weeks ago, the GOI would do its best to keep the passages open. He was not as forthcoming on convoys, however, stating that Israel has intelligence of plans to transfer Qassam rocket know-how from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank. For this reason, he explained, "convoys don't fit with terror attempts," and would not start for the time being. On Iran, Mofaz said the GOI wants deep IAEA inspections of all locations in the country. End summary.

¶2. (C) Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz told the Ambassador, A/S Welch, DAPNSA Abrams, General Dayton, and PolCouns January 12 that Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmud Abbas's leadership has been very weak this year, and that there is "high anarchy" in the PA. He said that there is no determination within the PA to fight terrorism, and that it does not have control of the Gaza Strip.

Palestinian Elections

¶3. (C) Mofaz said that there are two issues surrounding the Palestinian elections. The first is the possibility that Hamas gains power in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and Hamas members become representatives. If this happens, he asserted, the GOI would not be able to have a dialogue with them as long as they continue undertaking terrorist activities. He added that the GOI does not agree with the Quartet statement on Hamas, which he claimed makes a distinction between Hamas members in the PLC and Hamas members in the cabinet. A/S Welch said the USG sees a difference between the legislative and executive branches of a government, but clarified that the USG would not talk to any Hamas person without a change in U.S. law and without Hamas changing its charter. He emphasized that the U.S. does not want to see Hamas in the government. We recognize they will attain seats in the PLC.

¶4. (C) The second issue, according to Mofaz, is the seeming desire of Abbas and other Palestinian leaders to find excuses to try to postpone the elections, scheduled for January 25. From Mofaz's perspective, it is important that the elections take place as scheduled because if they are postponed for 2-3 months, Hamas could gain even more power and the PA could become weaker still. He remarked that the GOI would not interfere with the elections and would let them be carried out as planned. He said elections in East Jerusalem would take place as in 1996, except for activities by Hamas members, and reiterated that Israel would "not be an obstacle." He concluded that, in any case, Hamas would be a part of the PLC because Fatah has made the mistake of splitting into three units over the past few months: the "Young Guard" led by Marwan Barghouti, the traditional "Old Guard," and the new batch of independents led by Salam Fayyad and Hanan Ashrawi.

¶5. (C) Mofaz said that the USG should make it clear to Abbas that, after the elections, Abbas should present a plan on how the PA is going to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure and implement the reforms required from the Sharm al-Sheikh summit of February 2005. He said that moving against terrorism is also part of the first phase of the road map,

and that the GOI will not have any discussions with the PA until this commitment is fulfilled. Mofaz opined that "it's about time" because Abbas has not made any progress on security services reform or taken any steps to control terrorism in the last year. A/S Welch concurred that the elections should take place as scheduled on January 25, and referred to the Secretary's statement to explain our expectations to the PA and the Palestinian voters. He pointed out that a delay would be dangerous because the time frame would be undefined, possibly stretching to years after the elections were supposed to take place. A/S Welch also expressed the USG's gratitude for the fact that the GOI has not contributed to being an excuse for delay. Abrams thanked Mofaz for his personal statements on Jerusalem voting.

Hizballah, Lebanon, and Syria

16. (C) Moving on to Israel's northern border, Mofaz said the GOI believes UNIFIL and the Lebanese army should have a presence along the Blue Line to minimize the possibility that Hizballah will attempt an escalation of attacks against Israel. He said he was in the north recently, and claimed he could see ongoing preparations on the ground for further attacks. He speculated this was Hizballah's attempt to shift the focus away from Syria. Mofaz also said he believes the USG, the UN, and the EU should make clear to Syria and Lebanon that these steps are unacceptable, and that UNIFIL and Lebanon should "keep the calm," especially in critical places where there have been attacks and attempts to kidnap Israeli soldiers. A/S Welch told Mofaz that the USG is working with France to update UNIFIL's mandate, when it expires in late January, to include Lebanese army steps.

17. (C) Mofaz asked whether the USG would put any pressure on Syria in the coming months. A/S Welch responded that the recent Khaddam interview and Mehlis' interview requests have raised alarms in Damascus again, after what seemed like a loss of momentum in December, and that the Syrians are again trying to break their isolation by reaching out to Saudi Arabia and Egypt. He said that Syria's isolation would not be broken at the expense of Hizballah or the investigation, however. Mofaz requested that if the USG is planning more aggressive moves against Damascus, the USG should warn the GOI in advance because Israel would be the first target. A/S Welch told Mofaz that while the President always reserves his options, the USG does not have any aggressive plans toward Syria; but, A/S Welch also cautioned him that Syria has plans against Israel and advised that the GOI restrain its response to any Syrian provocations. Mofaz said the GOI understands that Syria's provocations are diversionary tactics from the Hariri assassination and U.S. pressure, but said that he could not predict what would happen in 2-3 months because he sees a connection between increases in Palestinian and Hizballah terror attacks. He said the possibility exists that after January 25, Israel will be facing two fronts, from the Palestinians, and from Lebanon and Syria. If this is the case, he said, he does not know how far the escalation will go, but he expects Lebanon to be responsible for what happens on its soil.

Rafah and Philadelphi Corridor

18. (C) Mofaz asserted that neither Egypt, the PA, nor EU/BAM have any control of the Rafah crossing, and that it is open for "any kind of movement," including smuggling of weapons. He said that, nevertheless, the GOI is committed to keeping it open, and is preparing Erez and Karni to be international passages in case the Palestinians continue to ignore the responsibilities of Rafah. A/S Welch said that it is important that these passages remain open vis-a-vis the November 15 Agreement on Movement and Access, and added that performance should be improved. He said that the USG would work with the EU, Egypt, PA, and the GOI to make sure the passages are functioning properly. A/S Welch suggested that Israel make it clear to Egypt that it wants the GOE to play a strong role in the passages.

19. (C) A/S Welch asked whether the GOI would help the elections on January 25 by easing restrictions to movement or starting convoys from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank. Mofaz responded that the GOI would do its best to keep the passages open, despite the car bomb attack against Karni interdicted four weeks ago, and the threat today of a PIJ operation. He said that for the time being, however, convoys would not start because Israel has intelligence on attempts to transfer Qassam technology to the West Bank. He said that Israel is doing other things to help the Palestinians, such as allowing businessmen and merchants to enter Israel, working on the Erez Industrial Zone with Turkey, and opening Erez with better infrastructure than in the past, but concluded that ultimately "convoys don't fit with terror attempts," and the "risk of convoys is too high for any profit Abu Mazen would

get."

¶10. (C) A/S Welch also asked how Israel could help improve election turnout, as higher turnout helps the Fatah candidates. In particular, he asked what the GOI's intentions were for movement in the West Bank. Mofaz was forthcoming, saying he understood the point that Israel wanted to have this effect, and that a plan was ready to relax movement controls (security permitting) 48-72 hours before the election.

Iran

¶11. (C) On Iran, Mofaz said the GOI wants deep IAEA inspections of all locations in the country. DAPNSA Abrams said that progress was being made in the IAEA and UNSC to start a continuous program of criticism and sanctions in conjunction with the EU. He said that Iran's rejection of the Russian proposal could be seen in a positive light because Russia could now support or abstain from any U.S. proposal in the UN, but would not obstruct.

¶12. (C) A/S Welch and DAPNSA Abrams have cleared this message.

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JONES